DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 187 708 SP 016 207

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TITLE New Dimensions in Social Studies: Focus on Skills.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 6p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Development; Inquiry; Learning Processes; *Reading Skills; *Skill Development; *Social Studies; *Study Skills; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The approaches and methods of teaching and learning social studies are examined. Fundamental study skills are emphasized: effective questioning techniques, data gathering, ability to recognize relationships in terms of time and space, and ability to recognize facts, opinions, and propaganda. To develop these skills it is recommended that priority be given to developing proficiency in essential reading, thinking and study skills rather than on rote learning of information. (JD)

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NEW DIMENSIONS IN SOCIAL STUDIES: FOCUS ON SKILLS

Sol K. Afolabi

The writing of this article grew out of the conviction that we are at the beginning of a new era in the teaching and learning of Social Studies. This era of change should therefore give us the opportunity to examine critically, some of our approaches and methods which deserve to be changed. In this regard, this article suggests that Social Studies should better focus on skills than is presently done.

We should instill in our students the approach and outlook of a social scientist. We should devise means which make the sophisticated tools, methods, and approaches of a social scientist available to our students. We should enhance the dynamism of the social sciences by developing in our students the power of mature scholarship by stimulating proficiency in essential reading, thinking and study skills.

The article has three parts. Part one explains further the need to focus on skills now than ever before. Part two shows that the present preoccupation with facts and content has played havoc on the need and desire to focus on skills while part three suggests how we can develop and stimulate proficiency in essential social studies skills and simultaneously enhance its other goals.

Part 1: The Significance of Skills in Social Studies.

With the overwhelming increase of printed matter in the last century, one could not possibly read in a lifetime the amount of material now published in a single day. Nor can one read fast enough to keep abreast of the rapid technological and scientific advances of today, which moves at such speeds that books not yet published are already outmoded. The problem becomes more complex if it is realized that there are ways other than the printed words through which an individual must keep himself informed and up to date. To be able to deal with the future and cope with the available data and current problems, the reader must be taught the skills of assimilating and using information from widely diverse sources.

Skills should take precedence over facts because an individual can survive if he or she forgets the detailed facts of history, geography, sociology or anthropology as long as he or she has mastery over essential skills in those subjects. Mastery of skills ensures the survival of the individual in an ever changing world because it is the only insurance against obsolescence in the world of knowledge. Skills alone enable an individual to replenish his stock of knowledge as the old ones become outmoded and inconsequential.

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Proficiency in thinking, reading and study skills has social values other than keeping the individual abreast of events and happenings. It enables the individual to escape the world of half-truths and mis-application. Proficiency in reading, study and thinking skills enables one to enjoy, to a degree, the fulfilment of one's talents. Skills taught and learned in school outlast school days. They can be utilized as individuals face the need to read legal briefs, produce-purchase charts, building plans, business contracts, medical, social or educational case histories, court decisions and instructions on industrial, professional or household materials, just to mention a few.

Mastery of essential reading, thinking and study skills also has tremendous educational values. It promotes true learning beyond memorizing by rote archaic facts and figures. It enables the student to generate new knowledge, thereby enhancing self fulfilment. It generates a sense of satisfaction which derives from a sense of accomplishment. Proficiency in reading, thinking and study skills generates a sense of determination to meet the future headlong by ensuring that our students will not live in tomorrow's world using yesterday's knowledge.

Part II: Why Skills have been neglected in Social Studies.

In spite of the validity and profundity of the argument in favor of teaching and developing essential skills in Social Studies in our students, reports on classroom experience and research show that those skills have been neglected in the teaching of Social Studies.[1] For example, in a cross-Canada survey of Social Studies teaching, it was revealed that in 22 percent of the 847 classes visited, the students could not acquire any learning skills whatsover.[2] Similarly, in the United States, an analysis of twenty six national Social Studies projects has shown that Social Studies text books featured "complete explanations that left little room for student thinking above the memory level."[3]

The reasons for neglecting the teaching and development of essential skills in Social Studies which the foregoing reveals may not be too difficult to identify. First, the existing Social Studies programs are too descriptive; often preoccupied with memorizing facts. Consequently, too much time is expended on mechanical, factual question and answer techniques of the assignment method. Moreover, the preoccupation with facts means that teaching of essential skills in the subject are relegated to the background.

Furthermore, the drill and rote memory which permeates most classroom environments stifles and suppresses the development and enhancement of those essential skills. When it is realized that many teachers of Social Studies have very little educational background in history, geoegraphy, sociology, economics,

politics and anthropology, one can appreciate the feeling of incompetence which these teachers display toward the teaching of Social Studies skills. On the other hand, even those with background in the subject may find it difficult to teach skills which they have not been taught.

Generally, most teachers of Social Studies neglect the teaching of skills because of the erroneous misconception that "true knowledge" can be transmitted from text book contents. This misconception leads us to down-grade the knowledge created by the pupils as less authentic and less valuable, even though the converse is true.

The assumption that reading, study and thinking skills will be and could be developed incidentally as an automatic by-product of exposure to well structured content has played a huge havoc on our readiness and desire to focus attention on the development of those skills. We have assumed that by assimilating someone else's thoughts and by exposing our students to well structured content, they will gain proficiency in skills basic to an effective understanding and mastery of the Social Studies process.

Unfortunately, almost all the existing text books also adopt an incidental approach to the development of skills in Social Studies. Both the text book writer and the classroom teacher have forgotten that mastery of skills do not automatically result from mere exposure to the content but have to be nourished by deliberate and sophisticated procedure and technique. It is high time we all realized that skills are mastered and developed only to the extent that they are identified, learned and applied by the student in the study of Social Studies content.

Part III: How to Regain our Focus on the Teaching and Learning of Skills in Social Studies.

In parts one and two, it has been demonstrated that though the teaching and mastery of skills in Social Studies have tremendous academic and social values, the subject has been neglected for various reasons. Part three is a synthesis of the earlier two parts because it shows how we can resolve the problems in part two in order to achieve our noble and extremely fundamental goals enunciated in part one.

The point of departure for us should be the recognition of the values and the need to train our students to discover and structure the unknown rather than to rediscover what is already known. We should all realize that "rediscovering the wheel serves little purpose." We should focus attention on the teaching and mastery of fundamental Social Studies skills such as effective questioning technique, the process of data gathering, the ability to recognize relationship in terms of time and space, ability to recognize facts, opinions, and propaganda.

We should also recognize the fact that the acquisition of basal reading skills in language arts is quite an inadequate preparation for learning Social Studies.

We are reminded that Social Studies require a great volume and range of reading and that the student has to interact with the subject in a peculiar or unique way. In this regard, he has to recognize and learn the technical vocabularies in geography, history and other social sciences as well as their terminologies and theories. The student must be helped to increase both the speed and the productivity of his or her reading. He must be taught the techniques of locating information from printed materials promptly and accurately as well as use the information effectively. Learning to use the index, the glossary, the content, abstracting information from non-printed words like cartoons, graphs, charts and pictures as well as learning to identify the main ideas and details readily come to mind in this regard.

We should also focus on the enhancement and development of thinking skills by teaching the technique of analysing, generalizing, synthesizing, predicting and evaluating.

In refocusing our goal on the teaching and mastery of skills, we should be constantly reminded that education should train the student to be flexible and adaptable. Feeding our students with ready-made facts promotes rigidity of thought as facts are accepted as unchangeable and immortal; whereas by teaching skills, the student is "freed up" to discover for himself.

Above all we have to keep our learning environment positive and stimulating. Learning and teaching the skills essential for the mastery of Social Studies beyond the content level warrants an atmosphere of trust between the teacher and the student. Developing a positive rapport between both the student and the teacher have fundamental implications for teaching and learning as we know it. It means that the teacher becomes more of a facilitator of knowledge than a "knowledge giver." Learning and teaching Social Studies skills in a positive environment also means that the learners are given the opportunity and security to practise their newly acquired skills in dealing with social and personal problems which may arise in the classroom, school and the community. The urge to part with or challenge traditions and customs and the urge to try new ways, new solutions, to express new insight, doubts and reservations will automatically accompany a successful teaching of basic skills in Social Studies. Our challenge is to nourish and enhance that urge rather than stifle it.

To be continued....

1979 S.K.A.

1. On the dichotomy which exists between the stated goals of Social Studies and its tangible achievements, see the following:

   a) Clinton Oliver Cory An Experimental Study to Compare the Development of Critical Thinking in Eighth Grade Social Studies. (M.Ed. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1974) p.3.
   b) Solomon K. Afolabi Dichotomy between Vision and Reality. A case study of the Public School Curriculum in Winnipeg, 1897-1908. (M.Ed. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1978) pp. 124-129.
   c) George D. Spache Toward Better Reading (Chicago: Garrard Publishing Company, 1966) p. 273.
   d) Bryon G. Massialas and Benjamin Cox Inquiry in Social Studies (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966) p.330.

2. A. B. Hodgetts, What Culture? What Heritage? (Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1968) pp.67-68.

3. Norris M. Sanders and Martin L. Tanck, "A Critical Appraisal of Twenty-Six National Social Studies Projects" Social Education 34 (April, 1970) p.383.